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THE INDIAN POPULATION OF CALIFORNIA

By C. HART MERRIAM

California at the time of its discovery was more densely populated than any area of equal size in North America. Not only was this the case, but the number of tribes and of distinct linguistic stocks within its boundaries nearly equaled those of all the rest of the continent north of Mexico. It is an extraordinary fact that among the multitude of languages spoken there were at least two dozen stocks differing from one another more than German from English, or Dutch from Italian. This points to a very remote antiquity, for languages are not developed in a day.

Although the aboriginal population is known to have been exceptionally large—owing mainly to the bounty of the food supply and the mildness of the winter climate—its numerical measure has never been carefully taken, and the published estimates differ widely in their totals. In seeking a basis on which to frame a logical estimate, one is confronted by the fact that the only reliable statistics for any considerable part of the state are those of the Mission fathers, prior to 1834; and of the first U. S. Indian commissioners and agents, for 1850–1852. The records of the padres relate only to the limited area dominated by the missions—a belt along the coast from San Francisco bay southward—and deal only with the baptized Indians, making no attempt to give the entire population. The records of the Indian commissioners relate mainly to tribes living along the western base of the Sierra and those of the northwestern quadrant of the state. They are manifestly incomplete, and moreover treat of a period so late that the native population had been sorely reduced by contact with the whites. It must be admitted at the outset, therefore, that no data exist to serve as a basis for an accurate estimate of the aboriginal population. Nevertheless, if it is possible to ascertain approximately the number

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of inhabitants of an area of considerable size, and to establish a relation between the density of population of this area and that of other parts of the state, a rough estimate for the whole state may be ventured. Fortunately, the records for the Mission strip furnish material for such an estimate.

The Mission strip, even if allowed to spread over the inner Coast rangès to San Joaquin valley, comprises only one-fifth of the non-desert part of the state. Hence if the aboriginal inhabitants were evenly distributed, the total population would have been five times that of this area.

Personal observation during ten years of field work in California, in the course of which I have enjoyed unusual opportunities for noting the character and quantity of the food supply, and the location of Indian villages in nearly all parts of the state, has convinced me that throughout the non-desert areas the food supply was surprisingly bountiful and the aboriginal population correspondingly large, and that in neither of these respects was the Mission strip more favored than other areas. Furthermore, in this strip the proportion of uninhabitable land was at least as large as elsewhere.

Even the great interior valley, in spite of its barren places, abounded in food. The plains were inhabited by doves, ground-squirrels and rabbits, and by bands of antelope and herds of elk; the brushy and weedy places along the streams gave shelter to countless thousands of quail; the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers with their sloughs and tributaries swarmed with waterfowl and teemed with mussels and fish; a sea of wild oats covered the land, and broad belts of noble oaks followed the rivers, affording a prodigious store of acorns.

The foothills and lower slopes of the Sierra for a distance of 500 miles, and the inner Coast ranges for a still greater distance, were likewise in the main carpeted with wild oats, interrupted by thickets of berry-bearing manzanitas and shaded by open forests of nut-bearing Digger pines and numerous kinds of oaks, which together furnished the principal food of the people. Throughout this vast area fish were plentiful in the streams, and game — rabbits, ground-squirrels, quail, and deer — overran the land. The north-western quadrant was equally favored and possessed several of the best salmon and eel rivers of the state.

The staple food was not everywhere the same: Along the Colorado river it was the mesquite bean; in the deserts east of the Sierra, the rich oily nuts of the piñon or nut pine; in the northwest and along salmon streams elsewhere, salmon and acorns; in the interior generally — the Sierra region, Coast ranges and included valleys — the acorns of a number of species of oaks. Indeed, in most parts of California acorns were and still are the staff of life. They are pounded into meal, which is leached to take out the bitter taste and then boiled in baskets by means of hot stones, forming a thick jelly-like nutritious mush. Acorns also are made into bread. The yield is not constant, having cycles of abundance and scarcity, but since in most localities half a dozen or more kinds occur together, and since all of these rarely if ever fail the same year, an absolute failure is probably unknown. In case of scarcity of acorns, however, the large nut of the California horse-chestnut or buckeye — a widespread and prolific bearer — was commonly used as a substitute. Buckeye meal needs more washing to take out the poison, but makes fairly good bread. Bread was made also from the nuts of the California laurel (*Umbellularia*). In certain areas oatmeal mush, made from wild oats, formed an important part of the food; and edible roots were always to be had. But acorns were rarely wanting, for it was the universal practice to gather and store each fall enough to last two years, so that if a bad year came the people would not suffer. Similarly, dried salmon, manzanita berries, mesquite beans, pine nuts, and other staple commodities were gathered and stored in large quantities.

From these facts it is obvious that the food supply was adequate for a very large population; and the number of occupied villages at the beginning of the gold period shows conclusively that the number of inhabitants was very great — though probably never large enough to press on the food supply.

There is every reason to believe, therefore, that the average density of population (excluding the deserts and high boreal mountains) was at least as great as in the Mission strip; and since this strip comprises only one-fifth of the non-desert area, the total population should have been five times that of the Mission strip. With this assumption as a basis, let us examine the data.

The padres, throughout the 65 years of their rule (1769-1834), not only made every effort to bring to the missions and baptize as many Indians as possible, but kept a careful record of the number baptized each year, and also, from time to time, of the total number present at all the missions. The period of most rapid growth was the decade covering the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th (1795-1805), during which the number swelled from 12,216 to 20,627 — a gain of 8,411. Then the rate slackened and a quarter of a century was needed to add 4,000. In 1830 the number had reached 24,634, and in 1834 upward of 30,000, after which it fell off rapidly. In selecting a date for an estimate of the population, therefore, we have little choice, it being necessary to take the period for which the data are fullest and least likely to lead to error. This beyond question is the year 1834 — the year in which the number of baptized Indians attained its maximum.

The number of these being known, it is important to determine the number of unbaptized or free Indians. This unhappily cannot be done with any degree of certainty. The Indians brought within the jurisdiction of the church were virtually slaves and were obliged to perform all the labor of the missions. Discontent was widespread and often led to desertion. Deserters were pursued, and if caught were flogged or otherwise punished. Hence it is not difficult to understand why the continued efforts to bring in new recruits were not always crowned with success, why so large a part of the population kept away from the missions, and why the natives came to be disposed in two sharply contrasted classes — the baptized and the unbaptized — called by the padres respectively 'neophytes' and 'gentiles.' While the record is full as to the number of neophytes, it is silent as to the number of gentiles. This is the weak point in the argument and there appears to be no way of getting around it. The ratio between the two classes was ever changing, for the number of neophytes not only fluctuated from year to year, but showed on the whole a progressive increase up to 1834, the year in which the secularization of the missions took place. In the early years the gentiles vastly outnumbered the neophytes, but at the close of the mission period it is practically certain that the neophytes largely outnumbered the gentiles. It being necessary to assume a ratio, I

have conjectured that in 1834 the 30,000 baptized Indians formed three-fourths ; the unbaptized or free Indians one-fourth of the native population, making a total of 40,000 for the Mission strip. This is believed to be a conservative estimate.

The question now arises as to the native population of the rest of the state. It having been shown that the aboriginal population except on the deserts was in all probability fully as dense as that of the Mission strip, it follows that the whole population of the non-desert part would be five times that of the Mission strip, or 200,000. But this takes no account of the Modoc, Washoo, Paiute, and Shoshonean tribes of the region east of the Sierra, or of the Mohave, Chemahueve, and Yuma of the lower Colorado, whose members living within the state must have numbered collectively at least 10,000. Hence the total Indian population of California at the close of the Mission period (1834) could hardly have been less than 210,000.

This estimate is likely to err on the conservative side, for although under Mission rule the number of neophytes continued to increase, the death-rate was startlingly high and the population as a whole steadily decreased, so that at the close of the Mission period it had already undergone material diminution. The padres state that up to the year 1824 they had baptized in all 86,000 persons, of whom at that time no fewer than 61,000 had disappeared. It would seem a conservative estimate, therefore, to assume that during the 65 years of Mission rule the decrease had amounted to 10,000 persons. Adding this number to the 40,000 already found to be the probable native population of the Mission strip in 1834 gives 50,000 as approximately the population before it had suffered from contact with the Spaniards. And if at the time of the discovery of California the population of the coast region from San Francisco bay southward was 50,000, the population of the main or non-desert part of the state, on the basis here adopted, would have been 250,000 (instead of 200,000). Adding to this the probable desert population of 10,000 gives for the whole state at the time of its discovery a probable population of 260,000.

It may be urged that there is no evidence that the population was equally dense in different parts of the state at the same time.

Admitting this, there surely is no evidence to the contrary, and the known facts point to a continuously contemporaneous population of large size throughout the non-desert parts up to the time each area in turn was smitten by the blight of foreign invasion. The widespread bounty of the food supply, the freedom from intertribal wars (except in the northwest), and the probable absence of epidemic diseases until introduced by the whites, all point in this direction.

Decrease and Extermination

There is every reason to believe that the native population, from the date of the discovery of California to the time when it was shriveled by oppressive contact with foreigners, had remained reasonably constant. It may be assumed, therefore, that the number of Indians at the beginning of the last century was approximately 260,000, and the number in 1834, 210,000.

During the height of the gold period, from 1850 to 1853 (disregarding Schoolcraft's absurdly low estimate of 32,000, and Barbour and Wozencroft's exaggerated guess of 200,000 to 300,000), at least three estimates were published by men whose business it was to deal with Indians. Adam Johnson, sub-agent in charge of the Valley Indians, gave the number as 80,000; Gen. E. F. Beale, superintendent of Indian affairs, as 75,000 to 100,000; and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, as 100,000. The mean of these is 88,750, which probably is not far out of the way.

The native population in 1856 was estimated by Hittell at 48,100.

Beginning with 1860 and continuing to the present time the Federal Census has recorded the number of Indians, as follows:

In 1860	31,338
1870	29,025
1880	20,385
1890	16,624
1900	15,377

In spite of obvious errors and discrepancies these statistics are of considerable interest and in the main may be regarded as approximately correct. Up to 1900 they doubtless err consistently in underestimating the number of wild or 'uncivilized' Indians liv-

ing away from the reservations, of which no count was made. The omission of this class — or its reduction to an absurdity — is conspicuous in the Census of 1890, where the number given is only 43. The actual number at this date could not have been fewer than 1,500 and probably exceeded 2,000.

I have made such corrections in the census and other returns as seemed called for in the light of the data already gathered, and submit the results as my personal estimate of the population at different times during the century ending with the year 1900.

*Estimate of Probable Indian Population of California at Different
Dates from 1800 to 1900.*

1800	260,000
1834	210,000
1849	100,000
1852	85,000
1856	50,000
1860	35,000
1870	30,000
1880	20,500
1890	18,000
1900	15,500

The tremendous decrease that has taken place during the last century — a decrease amounting to the complete annihilation of scores of tribes and the reduction to scattered remnants of scores of others — is due wholly to the coming of the white man. It began in the early days of the mission padres, as we have already seen, and has continued to the present time. While in the main gradual, there were two periods in which its rate was suddenly and greatly accelerated. The first of these was the period immediately following the confiscation of the missions, beginning in 1834; the second the period immediately following the discovery of gold, beginning in 1848.

The decrease following the mission period was startlingly rapid. The four years immediately preceding the confiscation of the missions were years of unprecedented prosperity and of marked increase in the neophytes, the number in 1834 having attained its maximum of upward of 30,000. By means of this multitude of subjugated

Indians, as stated by Hittell in his admirable *History of California*, the flocks of the mission fathers were herded, their fields tilled, and the value of their properties and possessions augmented in all directions. They had upward of 420,000 cattle, 60,000 horses and mules, 320,000 sheep, goats, and hogs; raised more than 200,000 bushels of grain and beans, and the income for the year exceeded a million of dollars. But this year was not only the one of greatest material prosperity for the missions; it was also the one in which their doom was sounded and their downfall begun. The government issued a decree providing for their 'secularization,' and the confiscation of the properties began at once. So fatal was the move, and so swift its operation, that in eight years the neophytes had dwindled to one-seventh the number present in 1834, leaving only 4,450 at the missions. This does not imply that in eight years 25,500 Indians had perished, but that the deaths and removals together amounted to this number. In the succeeding years the neophytes who had left the missions found themselves wholly unable to cope with the changed conditions and soon passed out of existence. They had been long clamoring for freedom, but when it came were unable to live under the new regime. A generation of bondage had unfitted them for self support; their old homes had been occupied or overrun by Spanish-Mexican rancheros and they found themselves unable to return to the old life or to adjust themselves to the new.

It may be argued that the Indians who left the missions, either before or after their confiscation, and also the free or wild Indians of the same territory, had fled to other parts of the state, and thus in disappearing from the Mission strip had merely moved away. This they undoubtedly did to a certain extent, particularly in the Tulare or Tache Lake country, but so far as any substantial migration is concerned, the evidence points in the opposite direction. In order to go anywhere else they were obliged to invade the territory of other tribes—tribes without exception speaking different languages. While it is known that individual Indians did this in many cases, there is no evidence to show that any considerable number joined other tribes. Had they done so they would have left many descendants; but in all my field work in California I have rarely met,

outside of the Mission strip and the small reservations from Tule river southward, a Mission Indian or the descendant of a Mission Indian. This to me is conclusive evidence that the great bulk of Mission Indians perished in their own territory.

The process of confiscation of the missions covered a dozen years (1834-1845) and its disastrous effects on the natives continued for several years longer — till in fact those of the Mission strip, except in the far south, had been practically exterminated. During the early part of this period the Spanish-Mexicans, who by this time far outnumbered the padres and their attendants, were establishing ranches in various outlying districts, and during the latter part, particularly after the seizure of California by the United States in 1846, American fortune seekers were pouring into the state in rapidly increasing numbers and pushing into districts previously unknown, thereby augmenting the pressure on the Indians and extending it far beyond the area of Mission influence. The shrinkage of the native population during the fifteen years from 1834 to 1849 I have estimated at 110,000, which is at the appalling rate of more than 7,000 a year.

The discovery of gold, in 1848, set in motion a tremor of excitement that swept around the world like a tidal wave, gathering recruits from all nations and hurrying them by land and sea to the Golden State. During the single year 1849 no fewer than 77,000 arrived. This army of gold seekers was a heterogeneous assemblage, comprising many good and noble men, but also thousands of the rougher and more turbulent classes, not excepting criminals. As these adventurers spread north and south over the flanks of the Sierra and penetrated the rugged mountains of the northwest, they everywhere invaded the territory of the Indians and decimated the native population. From Humboldt and Trinity counties, from the Siskiyou, and from the flanks of the Sierra, the story is the same : villages were broken up and the inhabitants scattered or massacred ; men and women were debauched with whisky ; men were ruthlessly killed ; women were appropriated, and seeds of disease were sown which undermined the constitutions of succeeding generations. This is not the place to recite the sickening details, which blacken many pages in the history of the Golden State. For present pur-

poses let it suffice that in most localities the Indians showed no resistance, although those of the northwestern area resented the conduct of the intruders and thus brought upon themselves a series of so-called 'Indian wars,' resulting in the extermination of many of the tribes and the reduction of the remainder to small remnants, which later were removed to Government reservations. Had the Indians of California been fighters, like the Apache or Blackfeet or Sioux, or any of the Plains tribes, the conquest of the state would have been a very different matter.

The fatal decrease following the mission period continued long enough to be overlapped by the beginning of the gold period, the two together forming a continuous series of years, extending from 1834 till the decline of active gold operations in 1855. But the distinctness of the two should be kept clearly in mind: One was a period of Spanish aggression; the other, of American aggression. There is also an important geographic difference, for the territory under jurisdiction of the missions was the coast strip from San Francisco bay south, from which the mission influence reached only to Sonoma on the north and to the San Joaquin valley on the east, although the Spanish-Mexican rancheros and raiding expeditions extended considerably beyond these limits. The operations of the gold seekers covered nearly the whole of the remaining parts of the state, and their blighting influence was particularly severe throughout the Sierra region and in the mountainous and until then unknown northern and northwestern districts. The two destroying armies together therefore covered practically the whole of California, leaving only the deserts on the east — and these were not wholly exempt.

We have already seen that the average annual decrease from the close of the Mission period in 1834 to the gold rush in 1849 was a little more than 7,000. Throughout the gold period this terribly devastating rate continued, the decrease during the seven years from 1849 to 1856 amounting to about 50,000. It appears, therefore, that for a period of not less than 22 years (1834-1856) the average annual decrease exceeded 7,000, amounting in the whole period to a loss of 160,000 Indians. But while the actual annual decrease seems to have been remarkably constant, the

population as a whole was rapidly diminishing, so that the percentage of decrease to the total population was rapidly increasing.

Later, when mining gradually gave place to agriculture, the tillers of the soil coveted the lands of the Indians and proceeded to take them without fear of interference from either the owners or the law; for until the year 1872, in cases in which a white person was a party, the testimony of Indians — be it said to the shame of California — was not admitted in any court of justice. Down to recent times, therefore, a white man could confiscate the home of an Indian, and even kill the occupants, without danger of punishment — and it may be added, in spite of the change in the law, that conditions today are not much better for the Indian.

Why, it may be asked, did not the Indians take matters into their own hands and defend themselves against the intruders? Because, as many of them have told me, they had learned that it was hopeless to oppose the will of the whites — to do so meant the loss of their property and probably also of their lives. Hence an Indian, when ordered by a white man to vacate the home where he was born and where his ancestors were buried — the spot more dear to him than all the world — usually obeyed, and obeyed promptly and without resistance. In the Sierra region many instances of this kind have been related to me by the sufferers from these cruel evictions.

According to the estimates here given, the shrinkage of the native population, particularly during the 22 years from the close of the mission period in 1834 to the decline of the gold period in 1856, was so great as to seem almost incredible, and prompts one to ask if additional contemporary evidence exists bearing on the subject. Evidence of this kind is so abundant that if assembled it would fill a volume. It relates not only to the steady decline of the native population throughout the state, but also to epidemics of smallpox and other diseases, to the demolition of sources of food supply, to the burning of stores of food laid up for winter, to the confiscation of homes, to cold-blooded massacres by both Spaniards and Americans, to raids for the alleged purpose of punishing horse thieves, but in most instances for the real purpose of capturing Indian children and young women for servants, and to the destruction of life attending the capture of Indians and their removal to

Government reservations. I have been told by eye-witnesses of an incredible outrage practised by a gang of cattle and hog men who in 1856 or 1857 took it upon themselves to drive the helpless Taches and other tribes from Tulare lake and lower Kings river to the Fresno reservation. Men, women, and children, including the sick and the aged, were hurriedly driven through mud and water during the height of the rainy season by brutal men on horseback ; many fell out and perished by the way, and those who reached the hated destination and afterward escaped, returned to find their food caches appropriated for the hogs, and on making their presence known, were themselves hunted down and quietly "taken care of" by the whites.

Speaking of the reservations in general, Hittell says that in nearly every case of removal the Indians had to be driven by force, and "not unfrequently only a remnant was left by the time the reservation was reached." He states also, with reference to the general shrinkage during the gold period, that "of over 10,000 Indians in Yuba, Placer, Nevada, and Sierra counties in 1849, not more than about 3,800 remained in 1854." In 1849 General Bidwell found about 1,000 Indians living on the Sacramento river near the place where Colusa now stands ; the survivors at present number fewer than 50. In 1829 Kit Carson saw 'thousands' in Napa valley ; in 1859 he could not find a twentieth of that number, and now hardly one is left. In 1850 Lieut. George H. Derby of the Topographical Engineers, U. S. A., found 1,100 Indians living about Tulare or Tache lake ; the number in this region at present is less than a dozen. The same year he found on Kings river seventeen villages with an aggregate population of 3,000 ; at present only one village remains and the number of inhabitants is less than 20. In the early fifties the native population along the lower Kaweah river and delta is said to have been about 5,000 ; at present it consists of about 25 persons.

These instances, and many others that might be given, show conclusively that the reduction of the native population, allowing liberally for overestimates as to original numbers, was of monstrous proportions and progressed with startling swiftness.

Another kind of evidence is furnished by the half-obliterated sites of villages which in the early days were thriving communities. Hundreds of these are now known.

In September, 1850, Adam Johnson, sub-agent in charge of the Valley Indians, wrote the Commissioner of Indian Affairs that within the short period of occupancy by the whites, the red man had fast faded away; many had died of disease; others had fled to the mountains to enjoy for a brief period their primeval sports of hunting and fishing. Practically all the coast Indians had gone; of the numerous tribes which only a few years before inhabited the country bordering on the bay of San Francisco, scarcely an individual was left. Two years later Gen. E. F. Beale, superintendent of Indian affairs in California, said in his official report: "Driven from their fishing and hunting grounds, hunted themselves like wild beasts, *lassoed*, torn from homes made miserable by want, and forced into slavery, the wretched remnant which escapes starvation on the one hand, and the relentless whites on the other, only does so to rot and die of a loathsome disease, the penalty of Indian association with frontier civilization."

The principal cause of the appallingly great and rapid decrease in the Indians of California is not, in my judgment, the number directly slain by the whites, or the number directly killed by whisky and disease, but a much more subtle and dreadful thing: it is the gradual but progressive and relentless confiscation of their lands and homes, in consequence of which they are forced to seek refuge in remote and barren localities, often far from water, usually with an impoverished supply of food, and not infrequently in places where the winter climate is too severe for their enfeebled constitutions. Victims of the aggressive selfishness of the whites, outcasts in the land of their fathers, outraged in their most sacred institutions, weakened in body, broken in spirit, and fully conscious of the utter hopelessness of their condition, must we wonder that the wail for the dead is often heard in their camps and that the survivors are passing swiftly away.

NOTE. — The chief sources of information drawn on in the preparation of the foregoing article are: Hittell, *History of California*; Bledsoe, *Indian Wars*; Derby, *Report of a Reconnaissance of the Tache Lake region, in 1850*; Reports of the first California Indian Agents and Commissioners, *Senate Ex. Doc. 4, Special Session, 1853*; Powers, *Indians of California, 1877*; Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs; the Federal decennial census, and my personal field notes. — C. H. M.

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